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CONTESTED URBAN REGENERATION IN ‘DEPRIVED’ INNER AREAS PRACTICES AND POLICIES IN BARRIERA DI MILANO, TURIN (ITALY).

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INTRODUCTION

The international debate about urban regeneration has so far privileged large-sized interventions in ‘deprived’ inner areas, mainly conceived as an application of conventional measures of physical rehabilitation and socio-economic development according to a blue-print global model. In this kind of experiences even the claim for an active participation of local residents tends to be reduced to ritual mechanisms that do not seem able to stimulate the rise of an enlarged decision-making and a real bottom up process.

Starting from a scientific perspective oriented to the socio-spatial practices that inform the every-day life of the cities, [our](#) article aims at enlightening the (missing) relationships between the urban policies led by institutional players and the practices carried out by social actors in ~~the~~ inner areas dubbed as ‘deprived’ and ‘marginal’.

The case-study is offered by a peripheral neighborhood in Turin (Italy), Barriera di Milano, observed as an ideal stage to investigate the interconnections, contradictions and dichotomies between the institutional urban measures applied to foster the local livability and wellness in the area and the concrete, ‘ordinary’ ways in which the neighborhood organizes its social and economic functions.

Despite the common opinion about the problematic nature of the quarter, the social relations, small businesses and cultural activities appear livable and well established, and contrast to the Municipality’s urban planning proposals, oriented to develop new residential and commercial areas around large public infrastructures. While the issue of ‘deprived peripheral areas’ has been at the core of the local political propaganda to the point that the polls in the peripheral neighborhoods have aroused an upheaval in the municipal government, –with the defeat of the former left-wing majority in favour of the ‘Five Stars’ movement– [our](#) article reveals the inability of such policies to dialogue effectively with the neighborhood multiple souls and resources.

1. REGENERATION POLICIES IN THE FRAMEWORK OF TURIN'S URBAN PLANNING

It is undeniable that, across Europe, the last two decades of urban interventions have been dominated by the combination of a large number of urban regeneration programmes, both aimed at contrasting the decline of old industrialised areas with injections of new economic functions, linked to the emerging knowledge economy, and the physical renewal of degraded inner and peripheral urban areas, as well as strategic planning initiatives involving the inter-municipal scale and proposing long-term spatial development perspectives.

In many respects, Turin and its metropolitan area reflect the same trajectory. Therefore, talking about urban regeneration in Turin means re-constructing and de-constructing ~~an~~ at least two whole decades of planning interventions, guided mostly by the local authorities but also involving private partners such as real-estate developers, big industrial players and a plethora of practitioners operating amongst Universities, professional agencies and public bodies. This ~~very~~ broad coalition of interests has deeply influenced the public debate on the recovery from the long crisis of the one-company town, once dominated by the Italy's most important automotive conglomerate FIAT, ~~which has~~ recently embarked on a similar in-depth restructuring of its economic and social basis.

These actors agreed on a common agenda based on the need to overcome the supposed ineffectiveness of traditional regulatory planning in many sectors (public housing, transport infrastructures, large-scale facilities), the fascination for integrated approaches to the urban project experienced in many European countries (in France, with *Quartiers en Crise*; in the UK, with the Urban Programme: Parkinson, 1989; Lawless, 1991), and the effort to replace the increasingly weak financial capacity of local authorities with private funding and the technical resources offered by non-profit organisations. All these factors must be observed in the light of a techno-political paradigm strongly influenced by a hegemonic neoliberal agenda, pushing for the opening of public policies to the needs of the property market and the priority of attracting external investors, reducing at the same time the role of the public sector in providing local services and increasingly privatising public spaces within the cities.

In 1997, the left-wing Turin's Municipality inaugurated the Special Project for Peripheries (SPP) office, a pioneer programme of a long-lasting period of urban regeneration policies. All the regeneration initiatives, whatever the referred programme (European, as in the Urban Community Initiative, national or local), were progressively gathered under the control of the SPP (Governa and Saccomani, 2004). Similar experiences were carried out in major Italian metropolitan areas and, after an early experimental phase in the very early nineties, all these programmes, aimed at innovating the urban and regional policies through the involvement of social actors and 'open' participation procedures, ended in a strong institutionalisation (Governa and Salone, 2005). A significant place in this regeneration framework is occupied by the Urban Programme, which involved two areas within the city, Mirafiori Sud and Barriera di Milano. At the end of the same period (1999), the Municipality, along with other minor surrounding municipalities, cultural institutions, universities and business representatives, undertook an ambitious activity of strategic planning, assigning to an external agency, *Torino Internazionale*, the pivotal role of managing the multi-lateral process of negotiation leading to a joint design for the envisaged future of

the metropolitan area in a growing global competitive context. The overall purpose was to reverse the negative cycle engendered by the industrial crisis and to accompany Turin on its post-Fordist pathway (Pinson, 2002). This action was also accompanied by a strong effort in reshaping the city image, trying to establish a polycentric structure through the regeneration of some strategic spatial axes (the ‘polycentric city’, structured by the so-called ‘Spine’: Fig. 1) and to affirm leading role in cultural production and consumption which has been emphasized in the public discourse of local élites (the ‘pyrotechnic city’ in the words of Belligni and Ravazzi, 2013).

Figure 1: The ‘polycentric’ city of Torino



Source: Belligni and Ravazzi, 2013

Over the last years, however, the strategic planning activity seems to show signs of difficulty: after a second Strategic Plan, published in 2006, a third edition was recently launched (Torino Strategica, 2015) but the economic and social context is radically different from the past and, despite the new branding discourses focused on consumption services – especially in the food and wine culture – and urban ‘smartness’, the city is struggling to find new paths for overcoming the ongoing crisis (Vanolo, 2015).

At the same time, the current austerity seems to have made significant impact on the large scale regeneration initiatives that characterised the previous programmes experienced by Turin in the 1990s. The urban regeneration cycle now seems to have come to an end. While large parts of the city have been renewed or profoundly rehabilitated, many other neighbourhoods are still lacking quality in public spaces, residential standards, public transport lines, and suffer from the dramatically reduced capacity of the local authority to support regeneration. The post-2007 crisis austerity policies, imposed by the central government and supra-national rules have worsened the still weak financial power of a municipality facing the burden of the debt due to the public expenditures for the Winter Olympics in 2006, inducing

the local élites to ask for the help of charities and citizens associations to cover a significant amount of the local budget for social and cultural purposes, like social housing, educational services, cultural programmes and so forth.

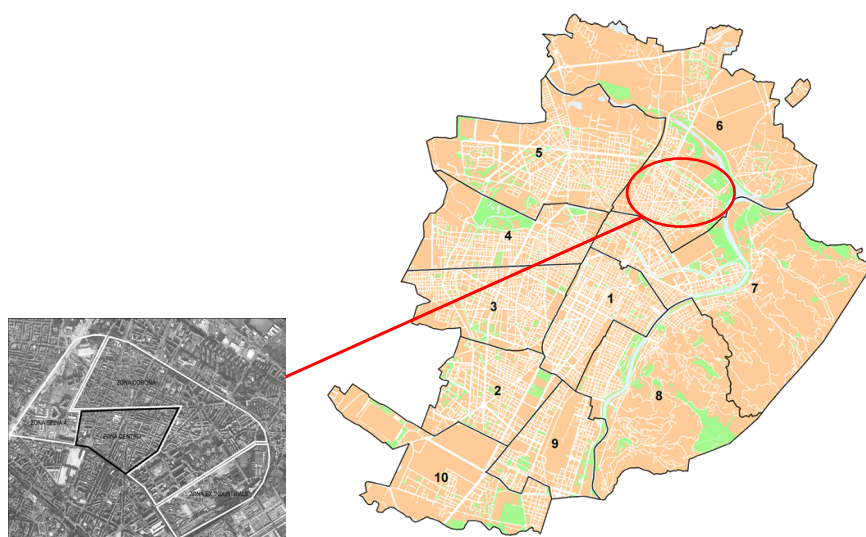
While the Municipality seeks to update its approach to urban processes made of small-scale functional and spatial transformations, many actors are defining and implementing their spatial strategies according to an informal but intentional behaviour, aiming to adapt the built environment of the post-Fordist city to their own practical needs. In many parts of the city, and particularly in the peripheral ones, a number of tiny, widespread and deep physical and social interventions are gradually changing the functional and physical geography, according to an emerging scheme which can be detected in many other urban areas throughout the post-industrial regions. Currently, this trend is privileging derelict or misused areas, formerly occupied by industrial activities and nowadays ‘liberated’ by shrinkage processes (Pallagst, Wiechmann and Martinez-Fernandez, 2013).

The next section will illustrate a specific case in which the extraordinary urban measures applied by the regional and local authorities fulfil the need of social and physical regeneration up to a point, while the neighbourhood practise ordinary and concrete ways of managing social and economic functions partially independent from the public support, both in technical and financial terms.

2. REGENERATION PLANNING TOOLS AND SPONTANEOUS SOCIO-SPATIAL PROCESSES IN AN INNER AREA: BARRIERA DI MILANO

Our case-study concerns the neighbourhood ‘Barriera di Milano’, for short Barriera, a large inner area of 47,163 inhabitants located in the north-eastern corner of Turin (Italy), formerly one of the most industrialised zones of the city (Fig. 2).

Figure 2: the neighbourhood ‘Barriera di Milano’, Turin, Italy



Source: authors' elaboration

Barriera has been long since a privileged subject for simplifying representations. Since the end of the nineteenth century an emblematic place of the Turin working class, at a certain moment of its history the neighbourhood received the stigma of a deprived area which is suffering more than others in Turin the precocious effects of deindustrialization: high unemployment rates, a precarious and sometimes even difficult cohabitation between 'autochthonous' and new residents, considerable levels of overpopulation induced by the high density of a decaying and thus cheap built environment, and scarce quality of public services.

In the urban history describing the Turin's evolution, the neighbourhood's fate is paradigmatic for many aspects: in a few decades the Barriera's image has evolved from that of a neighbourhood playing as a protagonist in the identity building process of Turin as a working class and left-wing city – strong trade unions and Communist Party, the antifascist workers' uprisings during the II world war - to the one of a paradigmatic example of the contradictions of the late Fordism and, at last, to an involuntary and restless laboratory of a multicultural pot produced by the globalization.

All these images represent just partially the reality and, owing to their simplified nature, have been easily communicate and have affected the neighbourhood perception, which actually is much more complex than this. Its fabric is so as articulated to represent the idea of a «fragile emiphery», «geographically compressed between centre and periphery», something «staying in the middle, fragile and disoriented, afraid that transformations which are affecting it can make it periphery even if it was not born as such» (Magatti, 2007, p. 140, author's translation).

In order to tackle the difficulties induced by an unachieved path of transformation and also connoted by remarkable factors of social and economic disadvantage, the Municipality have realized some relevant initiatives of regeneration between 1997 and 2014, culminating in the Integrated Programme of Urban Development (*Programma Integrato di Sviluppo Urbano*, PISU) Urban Barriera.

Barriera neighbourhood was actually included within the areas concerned by the action promoted in the before mentioned SPP, launched by the City of Turin in 1997.

In its original formulation, the project envisaged a range of structural and social interventions on disadvantaged neighbourhoods and urban areas, according to such international models as *Quartiers en Crise* and the integrated approach recommended for the so-called Complex Urban Programmes, introduced in Italy in the early nineties (for a detailed description of the Turin experience see Bighi, 2017; moreover, for a critical overview of the Turin urban regeneration in the wider international context see Governa and Saccomani, 2004).

In the first stage of SPP, Barriera was the target of one of the 'Participated Actions of Local Development' (*Azioni Partecipate di Sviluppo Locale*), giving rise to a co-design process through the setting up of a working group led by the Municipality gathering institutional and technical bodies and citizens' associations. These experiences have nurtured the Urban Barriera Committee, set up by the urban administration ten years later, in 2007, formally approved and funded in 2010 by the Piedmont Region, which is in charge for the management of the ERDF 2007-2013 and had already supported the PIC Urban for the industrial areas of Mirafiori North (Cianfriglia e Giannini, 2017).

By the way, in those years (2007-2008) Barriera emerged as a 'difficult' area, synthetically described by the accompanying report of the Urban Development Integrated Programme (PISU, *Programma Integrato di Sviluppo Urbano*) which underscores the high rate of foreigner and jobless people in comparison to the average of the whole city. Therefore, starting from this worrying picture, the representation

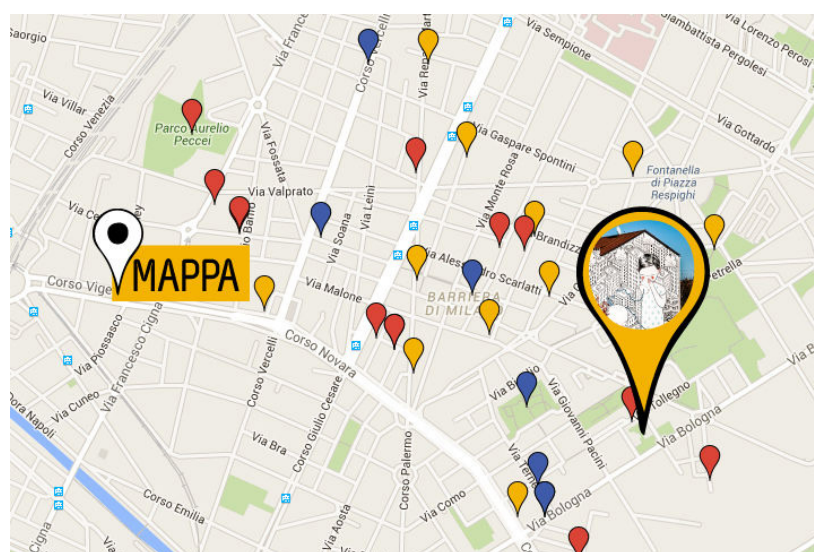
of Barriera di Milano as problematic and marginal multi-ethnic neighbourhood has arisen, a less ‘positional’ than metaphorical marginality, and this image has tended to replace the previous one emphasizing the role of a working class quarter.

Actually, the last sociological inquiries into the neighbourhood (Magatti, 2007) put into evidence a growing social fragmentation of a neighbourhood already raised by social inequalities and made of ethnic micro-communities not communicating with each other.

If in the Turin collective consciousness Barriera’s identity as a working class neighbourhood tends to vanish, for the loss of its historical industrial character due to the deindustrialization and the implementation of the Master Plan (*Piano Regolatore generale*, PRG) which has encouraged an increasing physical renewal, even the inhabitants’ self-representation is witnessing a sense of insecurity that overcomes the empirical data and mirrors the difficulty to find orientation points in a phase of intense transformation. This does not mean that the problems of the neighbourhood are imaginary, but simply that this overrate of threats contrasts to a reality made of a rich associational and commercial life, as the local retail and handcraft activities testify (Governa, 2015), along with a proliferation of cultural initiatives that depict an attractive context for external people in searching ~~ing~~ of cheap and livable location (Salone, Bonini Baraldi e Pazzola, 2017).

The PISU Urban Barriera is the only initiative realized for the quarter in the framework of the Municipality urban strategies: actually the big processes of transformation of the area, essentially included in a partial revision of the Master Plan (a proposed new tool called ‘Variante 200’), have not been implemented yet, and recent declarations of the current administration seem to exclude that they will have. Through the PISU not negligible effects can be detected in the neighbourhood: new pedestrian areas, around the refurbished market place of piazza Foroni, some punctual requalifications of public spaces, like the school backyards, the bike lanes, and a street art programme for embellishing the blank walls of the quarter (Fig. 3).

Figure 3: the map of writer Millo’s work in Barriera



Source: <http://www.comune.torino.it/urbanbarriera/news/arte-e-rigenerazione-urbana-in-barriera-di-milano.shtml>

Furthermore, Urban Barriera has played the function of a vehicle for the transformation of some large brownfields where the interventions had been unachieved. Among them there have been some flagship initiatives for the quarter, like the new park ‘Aurelio Peccei’ in an abandoned industrial site of 43,000 sm, not only a green space but also a memory place of the industrial heritage, and the requalification of the old warehouse ex INCET, nowadays housing Open Incet Innovation Center Torino, a multifunctional pole dedicated to the social innovation practices.

Lastly, Barriera di Milano and the whole northern side of the city have been interested by a huge new planning tool, ‘Variante 200’, aimed at revising the Master Plan after the 2006 Winter Olympics, essentially based on a strong reinforcing of the public transport system, with the realization of a second underground line along an abandoned railway connecting the old factories agglomeration to a misused commercial station, Scalo Vanchiglia. Around the main points of the line the city planners have foreseen to aggregate a cluster of residential and commercial activities, a project that the 2007 crisis and the subsequent budget cuts have made not realistic. In the end, the legal validity of this plan has expired and now the destiny of the project is uncertain.

3. «GOING ALONE»: THE DECREASING ROLE OF PUBLIC POLICIES IN MOBILIZING LOCAL ACTIVISM

Recent inquiries conducted into the neighbourhood, aimed particularly at investigating the function of cultural production in shaping and fostering the neighbourhood life and spaces (for the results and the methodology of the empirical research see Salone, Bonini Baraldi and Pazzola, 2017), have also taken into consideration the role played by the urban policies, especially those led by the Urban Barriera Committee with the PISU, as factors of sense-meaning and place-making in a ‘problematic’ quarter.

As a general outcome of the interviews, despite the great investments conveyed in the physical renovation and in the socio-economic regeneration of the quarter, Urban Barriera does not emerge as a primary actor contributing to the local ferment in new activities both in the commercial and ~~in~~ cultural sector, despite the fact that one of the main objectives of the intervention was precisely that of strengthening of the social and cultural associations. Just a few organisations contacted testify the development of ~~any~~ projects in cooperation with Urban Barriera, or state that they consider Urban as a key interlocutor in the neighbourhood.

«Urban’s work has focused mainly on helping small businesses, with little focus on the cultural sector. The intervention remains clumsy, we did a «spot» project with them but there is no continuity over time. They have a vision of participatory planning, which in fact is a mere creation of consent, the accompaniment to pre-packaged projects [...] they help to swallow the indigestible. Urban plays an stimulating role in regeneration, that’s worked sometimes. They have worked on desperate spaces (such as the ex Ceat gardens), putting plasters on irresponsible urban interventions.»

This is a decisive issue: Urban Barriera is a municipal tool for supporting local initiatives, developing the community, stimulating socio-cultural events and urban regeneration and its actions in the neigh-

bourhood have been important for physical requalification. Nevertheless, its influence on the social life has not been perceived as much significant as the City of Turin wanted. Concerning the socio-spatial practices the empirical research records a certain gap between the role of Urban Barriera Committee and the most important local entities, which witness once again the limited weight of public interventions, especially in affecting local cultural production.

Urban has many employees but does not actually come into contact with the local people (operators only). It is unusual, for example, that the «tavolo delle arti» (arts round table) was organized only now and not four years ago. Urban is perceived as a tool for planting new flower beds and keeping the gardens tidy. [...] The community dimension exists, and is wary of experiences that are imposed from the top».

«We think the intervention of Urban is imperfect, there is no possibility for long-term programming. And in any case, in urban planning terms, they have done two supermarkets and big blocks. There are no services (on the contrary, they have been reduced) and there are no commercial activities»

An additional aspect that seems to downsize the role of public policies is the degree of economic dependency on the public support of the most innovative initiatives carried out in the quarter, especially in the cultural production and consumption sectors. Also in this aspect, there is a strong contrast to the common belief that considers the public sector as a crucial actor in supporting – and conditioning – the cultural activities. The majority of the organisations analysed are relatively independent from public funding: some of them act in total autonomy, while others access public funds for specific projects only, and therefore not to develop everyday activities, far removed from the logic of public support followed in the past. One of the reasons can certainly be found in the lack of public resources over the past few years (in many cases public support comes in the form of non-financial contributions, such as the free or discounted use of the spaces of action), and this with the awareness of the impossibility to survive through public funds only. The wish for independence, «going alone», in a purely entrepreneurial perspective, without however being oriented to profit, appears as an emerging aim from many of the interviews.

«To remain independent we never applied for funding. This was an explicit desire right from the start, which stayed a part of our everyday action»

«We promote a Do It Yourself culture. Our budget comes from renting spaces and two fixed-term projects with defined budgets. Before we used to run a summer festival that required huge investments and public support was one third of the total cost. [...] We could cope with thirty percent less income from public funding if we didn't run the two municipal projects anymore, as these are also the most expensive (and if we didn't have to cover the territory). We do everyone on our own. We get help from volunteers who decide what to do and how to contribute, also learning a profession»

A brief reflection on the legal status of the organisations and the emerging business models – in other words the logic by which an organisation is able to work and support itself – confirms this interpretation. While non-profit activities (15) clearly prevail of profit-based ones, what is in addition surprising is the low presence both of foundations and cooperatives. What also emerges is the presence of single

or in any case unstructured subjects, that can clearly be seen in the case of artists as well as others: for example this is the case of an association acting in the education sector which, while enjoying a number of collaborations and voluntary relations, has not yet been able to develop a formal structure.

Beyond the formal aspects, it is however interesting to see how the majority of organisations develop some kind of commercial or entertainment activities, certainly not driven by a logic of profit but in any case aimed at meeting supply and demand in the market. Some organisations survive by focusing mainly on the creative ability to reduce costs (voluntary work, the recycling for restructuring and furniture works, work remuneration methods, guaranteeing low cost spaces). In other cases the role of commercial activities supporting the socio-cultural activities play a more important role, developing a model based on the diversification of activities. Finally, the most numerous group is the one of organisations which, although developing cultural/artistic activities, address explicitly the market (with clients, commercial and leisure activities). There are fewer organisations which base their survival on both public and private «non-repayable» funding (sponsorships, banking foundations): while the public sector seems to have withdrawn, it has certainly not been replaced by private patronage. Rather than seeking external funding, the organisations have chosen the path of entrepreneurship.

CONCLUSION

The reconstruction of the experiences in the previous sections shows the vitality of *Barriera di Milano* as a socio-spatial context able to trigger original, autonomous and self-organising practices, even during a lasting urban crisis and despite the demise of public sector intervention. The empirical evidence of our research on *Barriera* shows that the process of de-industrialisation and its vacant remains can offer ‘porosities’ for independent cultural productions to revitalise the urban spaces.

As regards the role of the public sector, in the majority of cases the influence of the policies is weak, if not non-existent, both in terms of input to the initiatives and funding. Thanks to this autonomy from the public sector, these initiatives are able to create «a coherent cultural geography within a larger and often undistinguished urban context» (Campo and Ryan, 2003, p. 293), a self-organising ecology where a variegated number of social actors work in order to give meaning to specific spaces (McCann, 2002).

Between the lines, we can certainly interpret these phenomena as the effect of the reduction of public resources and, in some cases, the desire of the public sector to allow the spontaneous dynamism of the local society to come to the fore. From another viewpoint, we may however also underline the reduced ability of the public sector to jump on the current bandwagon of innovation, often because many of the initiatives we have come across are often the result of individual commitment, or in any case commitment that is much more fragmented than in the past.

Besides, we are faced with a sort of urban activism which seems to have very different characteristics from those emerging in the 1970s and ‘80s (Pickvance, 2003), compared to which they are much more fragmented and heterogeneous. This commitment does not appear to be linked to the conventional categories of social and cultural work which marked previous decades and which, very probably, are the result of social and economic transformations led by the recent crisis: not differently from other urban situations, here too the neo-liberal cultural wave led to a disarticulation of urban societies, causing dif-

ferentiated reactions according to social group (Mayer, 2013). In our case, the prevalence of associations compared to traditional cooperatives and the high number of entrepreneurs – understood as the propensity for individual and collective risk, contrasting the logic of public support – is on the other hand another clear signal emerging from the interpretation of key organisational methods, and which perhaps the relative importance has still to be understood by the public sector, which is used to other operating methods.

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